AGATHA CHRISTIE

While the Light Lasts

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While the Light Lasts

A Short Story

Agatha Christie

WITNESS IMPULSE

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WHILE THE LIGHT LASTS

The Ford car bumped from rut to rut, and the hot African sun poured down unmercifully. On either side of the so-called road stretched an unbroken line of trees and scrub, rising and falling in gently undulating lines as far as the eye could reach, the colouring a soft, deep yellow-green, the whole effect languorous and strangely quiet. Few birds stirred the slumbering silence. Once a snake wriggled across the road in front of the car, escaping the driver's efforts at destruction with sinuous ease. Once a native stepped out from the bush, dignified and upright, behind him a woman with an infant bound closely to her broad back and a complete household equipment, including a frying pan, balanced magnificently on her head.

All these things George Crozier had not failed to point out to his wife, who had answered him with a monosyllabic lack of attention which irritated him.

"Thinking of that fellow," he deduced wrathfully. It was thus that he was wont to allude in his own mind to Deirdre Crozier's first husband, killed in the first year of the War. Killed, too, in the campaign against German West Africa. Natural she should, perhaps—he stole a glance at her, her fairness, the pink and white smoothness of her cheek, the rounded lines of her figure—rather more rounded perhaps than they had been in those far-off days when she had passively permitted him to become engaged to her, and then, in that first emotional scare of war, had abruptly cast him aside and made a war wedding of it with that lean, sunburnt boy lover of hers, Tim Nugent.

Well, well, the fellow was dead—gallantly dead—and he, George Crozier, had married the girl he had always meant to marry. She was fond of him, too; how could she help it when he was ready to gratify her every wish and had the money to do it, too! He reflected with some complacency on his last gift to her, at Kimberley, where, owing to his friendship with some of the directors of De Beers, he had been able to purchase a diamond which, in the ordinary way, would not have been in the market, a stone not remarkable as to size, but of a very exquisite and rare shade, a peculiar deep amber, almost old gold, a diamond such as you might not find in a hundred years. And the look in her eyes when he gave it to her! Women were all the same about diamonds.

The necessity of holding on with both hands to prevent himself

being jerked out brought George Crozier back to the realities. He cried out for perhaps the fourteenth time, with the pardonable irritation of a man who owns two Rolls-Royce cars and who has exercised his stud on the highways of civilization: “Good Lord, what a car! What a road!” He went on angrily: “Where the devil is this tobacco estate, anyway? It’s over an hour since we left Bulawayo.”

“Lost in Rhodesia,” said Deirdre lightly between two involuntary leaps into the air.

But the coffee-coloured driver, appealed to, responded with the cheering news that their destination was just round the next bend of the road.

The manager of the estate, Mr. Walters, was waiting on the stoep to receive them with the touch of deference due to George Crozier’s prominence in Union Tobacco. He introduced his daughter-in-law, who shepherded Deirdre through the cool, dark inner hall to a bedroom beyond, where she could remove the veil with which she was always careful to shield her complexion when motoring. As she unfastened the pins in her usual leisurely, graceful fashion, Deirdre’s eyes swept round the whitewashed ugliness of the bare room. No luxuries here, and Deirdre, who loved comfort as a cat loves cream, shivered a little. On the wall a text confronted her. “What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?” it demanded of all and sundry, and Deirdre, pleasantly conscious that the question had nothing to do with her, turned to accompany her shy and rather silent guide. She noted, but not in the least maliciously, the spreading hips and the unbecoming cheap cotton gown. And with a glow of quiet appreciation her eyes dropped to the exquisite, costly simplicity of her own French white linen. Beautiful clothes, especially when worn by herself, roused in her the joy of the artist.

The two men were waiting for her.

“It won’t bore you to come round, too, Mrs. Crozier?”

“Not at all. I’ve never been over a tobacco factory.”

They stepped out into the still Rhodesian afternoon.

“These are the seedlings here; we plant them out as required. You see—”

The manager’s voice droned on, interpolated by her husband’s sharp staccato questions—output, stamp duty, problems of coloured labour. She ceased to listen.

This was Rhodesia, this was the land Tim had loved, where he and she were to have gone together after the War was over. If he had not been killed! As always, the bitterness of revolt surged up in her at that thought. Two short months—that was all they had had. Two months of happiness—if that mingled rapture and pain were happiness. Was

love ever happiness? Did not a thousand tortures beset the lover's heart? She had lived intensely in that short space, but had she ever known the peace, the leisure, the quiet contentment of her present life? And for the first time she admitted, somewhat unwillingly, that perhaps all had been for the best.

"I wouldn't have liked living out here. I mightn't have been able to make Tim happy. I might have disappointed him. George loves me, and I'm very fond of him, and he's very, very good to me. Why, look at that diamond he bought me only the other day." And, thinking of it, her eyelids dropped a little in pure pleasure.

"This is where we thread the leaves." Walters led the way into a low, long shed. On the floor were vast heaps of green leaves, and white-clad black "boys" squatted round them, picking and rejecting with deft fingers, sorting them into sizes, and stringing them by means of primitive needles on a long line of string. They worked with a cheerful leisureliness, jesting amongst themselves, and showing their white teeth as they laughed.

"Now, out here—"

They passed through the shed into the daylight again, where the lines of leaves hung drying in the sun. Deirdre sniffed delicately at the faint, almost imperceptible fragrance that filled the air.

Walters led the way into other sheds where the tobacco, kissed by the sun into faint yellow discoloration, underwent its further treatment. Dark here, with the brown swinging masses above, ready to fall to powder at a rough touch. The fragrance was stronger, almost overpowering it seemed to Deirdre, and suddenly a sort of terror came upon her, a fear of she knew not what, that drove her from that menacing, scented obscurity out into the sunlight. Crozier noted her pallor.

"What's the matter, my dear, don't you feel well? The sun, perhaps. Better not come with us round the plantations? Eh?"

Walters was solicitous. Mrs. Crozier had better go back to the house and rest. He called to a man a little distance away.

"Mr. Arden—Mrs. Crozier. Mrs. Crozier's feeling a little done up with the heat, Arden. Just take her back to the house, will you?"

The momentary feeling of dizziness was passing. Deirdre walked by Arden's side. She had as yet hardly glanced at him.

"Deirdre!"

Her heart gave a leap, and then stood still. Only one person had ever spoken her name like that, with the faint stress on the first syllable that made of it a caress.

She turned and stared at the man by her side. He was burnt almost black by the sun, he walked with a limp, and on the cheek nearer hers was a long scar which altered his expression, but she knew him.

"Tim!"

For an eternity, it seemed to her, they gazed at each other, mute and trembling, and then, without knowing how or why, they were in each other's arms. Time rolled back for them. Then they drew apart again, and Deirdre, conscious as she put it of the idiocy of the question, said:

"Then you're not dead?"

"No, they must have mistaken another chap for me. I was badly knocked on the head, but I came to and managed to crawl into the bush. After that I don't know what happened for months and months, but a friendly tribe looked after me, and at last I got my proper wits again and managed to get back to civilization." He paused. "I found you'd been married six months."

Deirdre cried out:

"Oh, Tim, understand, please understand! It was so awful, the loneliness—and the poverty. I didn't mind being poor with you, but when I was alone I hadn't the nerve to stand up against the sordidness of it all."

"It's all right, Deirdre; I did understand. I know you always have had a hankering after the fleshpots. I took you from them once—but the second time, well—my nerve failed. I was pretty badly broken up, you see, could hardly walk without a crutch, and then there was this scar."

She interrupted him passionately.

"Do you think I would have cared for that?"

"No, I know you wouldn't. I was a fool. Some women did mind, you know. I made up my mind I'd manage to get a glimpse of you. If you looked happy, if I thought you were contented to be with Crozier—why, then I'd remain dead. I did see you. You were just getting into a big car. You had on some lovely sable furs—things I'd never be able to give you if I worked my fingers to the bone—and—well—you seemed happy enough. I hadn't the same strength and courage, the same belief in myself, that I'd had before the War. All I could see was myself, broken and useless, barely able to earn enough to keep you—and you looked so beautiful, Deirdre, such a queen amongst women, so worthy to have furs and jewels and lovely clothes and all the hundred and one luxuries Crozier could give you. That—and—well, the pain—of seeing you together, decided me. Everyone believed me dead. I would stay dead."

"The pain!" repeated Deirdre in a low voice.

"Well, damn it all, Deirdre, it hurt! It isn't that I blame you. I don't. But it hurt."

They were both silent. Then Tim raised her face to his and kissed it with a new tenderness.

"But that's all over now, sweetheart. The only thing to decide is how we're going to break it to Crozier."

"Oh!" She drew herself away abruptly. "I hadn't thought—" She broke off as Crozier and the manager appeared round the angle of the path. With a swift turn of the head she whispered:

"Do nothing now. Leave it to me. I must prepare him. Where could I meet you tomorrow?"

Nugent reflected.

"I could come in to Bulawayo. How about the Café near the Standard Bank? At three o'clock it would be pretty empty."

Deirdre gave a brief nod of assent before turning her back on him and joining the other two men. Tim Nugent looked after her with a faint frown. Something in her manner puzzled him.

Deirdre was very silent during the drive home. Sheltering behind the fiction of a "touch of the sun," she deliberated on her course of action. How should she tell him? How would he take it? A strange lassitude seemed to possess her, and a growing desire to postpone the revelation as long as might be. Tomorrow would be soon enough. There would be plenty of time before three o'clock.

The hotel was uncomfortable. Their room was on the ground floor, looking out on to an inner court. Deirdre stood that evening sniffing the stale air and glancing distastefully at the tawdry furniture. Her mind flew to the easy luxury of Monkton Court amidst the Surrey pinewoods. When her maid left her at last, she went slowly to her jewel case. In the palm of her hand the golden diamond returned her stare.

With an almost violent gesture she returned it to the case and slammed down the lid. Tomorrow morning she would tell George.

She slept badly. It was stifling beneath the heavy folds of the mosquito netting. The throbbing darkness was punctuated by the ubiquitous ping she had learnt to dread. She awoke white and listless. Impossible to start a scene so early in the day!

She lay in the small, close room all the morning, resting. Lunchtime came upon her with a sense of shock. As they sat drinking coffee, George Crozier proposed a drive to the Matopos.

"Plenty of time if we start at once."

Deirdre shook her head, pleading a headache, and she thought to herself: "That settles it. I can't rush the thing. After all, what does a day more or less matter? I'll explain to Tim."

She waved goodbye to Crozier as he rattled off in the battered Ford. Then, glancing at her watch, she walked slowly to the meeting place.

The Café was deserted at this hour. They sat down at a little table

and ordered the inevitable tea that South Africa drinks at all hours of the day and night. Neither of them said a word till the waitress brought it and withdrew to her fastness behind some pink curtains. Then Deirdre looked up and started as she met the intense watchfulness in his eyes.

"Deirdre, have you told him?"

She shook her head, moistening her lips, seeking for words that would not come.

"Why not?"

"I haven't had a chance; there hasn't been time."

Even to herself the words sounded halting and unconvincing.

"It's not that. There's something else. I suspected it yesterday. I'm sure of it today. Deirdre, what is it?"

She shook her head dumbly.

"There's some reason why you don't want to leave George Crozier, why you don't want to come back to me. What is it?"

It was true. As he said it she knew it, knew it with sudden scorching shame, but knew it beyond any possibility of doubt. And still his eyes searched her.

"It isn't that you love him! You don't. But there's something."

She thought: "In another moment he'll see! Oh, God, don't let him!"

Suddenly his face whitened.

"Deirdre—is it—is it that there's going to be a—child?"

In a flash she saw the chance he offered her. A wonderful way! Slowly, almost without her own volition, she bowed her head.

She heard his quick breathing, then his voice, rather high and hard.

"That—alters things. I didn't know. We've got to find a different way out." He leant across the table and caught both her hands in his. "Deirdre, my darling, never think—never dream that you were in any way to blame. Whatever happens, remember that. I should have claimed you when I came back to England. I funked it, so it's up to me to do what I can to put things straight now. You see? Whatever happens, don't fret, darling. Nothing has been your fault."

He lifted first one hand, then the other to his lips. Then she was alone, staring at the untasted tea. And, strangely enough, it was only one thing that she saw—a gaudily illuminated text hanging on a whitewashed wall. The words seemed to spring out from it and hurl themselves at her. "What shall it profit a man—" She got up, paid for her tea and went out.

On his return George Crozier was met by a request that his wife might not be disturbed. Her headache, the maid said, was very bad.

It was nine o'clock the next morning when he entered her

bedroom, his face rather grave. Deirdre was sitting up in bed. She looked white and haggard, but her eyes shone.

"George, I've got something to tell you, something rather terrible —"

He interrupted her brusquely.

"So you've heard. I was afraid it might upset you."

"*Upset* me?"

"Yes. You talked to the poor young fellow that day."

He saw her hand steal to her heart, her eyelids flicker, then she said in a low, quick voice that somehow frightened him:

"I've heard nothing. Tell me quickly."

"I thought—"

"Tell me!"

"Out at that tobacco estate. Chap shot himself. Badly broken up in the War, nerves all to pieces, I suppose. There's no other reason to account for it."

"He shot himself—in that dark shed where the tobacco was hanging." She spoke with certainty, her eyes like a sleepwalker's as she saw before her in the odorous darkness a figure lying there, revolver in hand.

"Why, to be sure; that's where you were taken queer yesterday. Odd thing, that!"

Deirdre did not answer. She saw another picture—a table with tea things on it, and a woman bowing her head in acceptance of a lie.

"Well, well, the War has a lot to answer for," said Crozier, and stretched out his hand for a match, lighting his pipe with careful puffs.

His wife's cry startled him.

"Ah! don't, don't! I can't bear the smell!"

He stared at her in kindly astonishment.

"My dear girl, you mustn't be nervy. After all, you can't escape from the smell of tobacco. You'll meet it everywhere."

"Yes, everywhere!" She smiled a slow, twisted smile, and murmured some words that he did not catch, words that she had chosen for the original obituary notice of Tim Nugent's death. "While the light lasts I shall remember, and in the darkness I shall not forget."

Her eyes widened as they followed the ascending spiral of smoke, and she repeated in a low, monotonous voice: "Everywhere, everywhere."

About the Author

AGATHA CHRISTIE is the most widely published author of all time, outsold only by the Bible and Shakespeare. Her books have sold more than a billion copies in English and another billion in a hundred foreign languages. She died in 1976.

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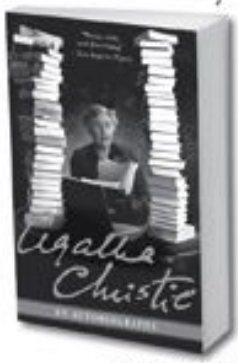

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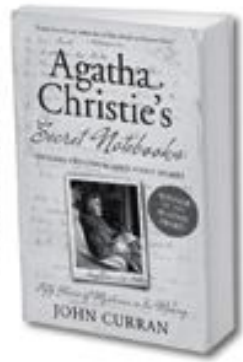

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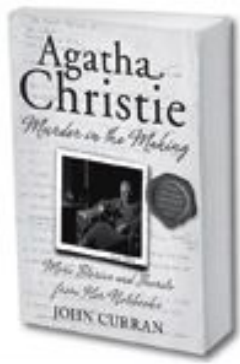

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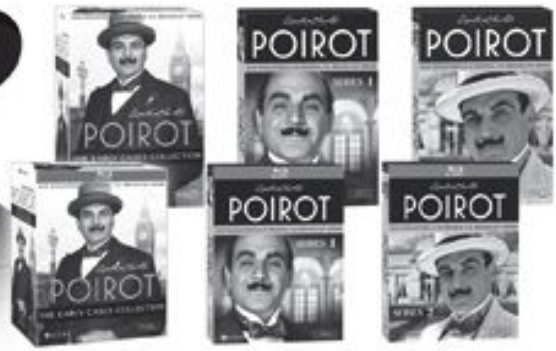

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